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The Mahdī Tradition in Islam: A Social-Cognitive Approach

ZEKI SARITOPRAK

Muslims believe that the Mahdī is the restorer who will come at the end of time to establish the reign of justice and righteousness. At the time of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) many messianic ideas were found among the Arabs; even the rise of Islam could have been perceived by some as the fulfilment of a messianic expectation. Those who were expecting a messiah were in fact looking for a guide who would lead them effectively to a superior way of religious and social life.

The expectation for the advent of the Mahdī among Muslims reflects a deep-rooted desire for a future-oriented ideal — the establishment of a just social order and a moral system of governance. The idea also has eschatological implications. This is in reference to the end of time, when humanity will need direction from a divine figure, it is being understood that the Mahdī will emerge at the end of time. This article attempts to show how the idea of the Mahdī springs from the universal idea of hope in Islam. In this paper we shall attempt to discuss the Mahdī in the early Sunnī tradition by focusing on the relevant *aḥādīth* and some of their interpretations. Next, we will examine the major figures in history who were believed to be Mahdīs. Moreover, we will explore the cultural environment's influences throughout the course of Islamic history on the idea of the Mahdī, and finally, attempt to show how the Mahdī embodies the idea of hope, that enduring force that drives humans to overcome life's challenges in expectation of a just future.

What is the Mahdī?

Almost all Muslims believe that a great personality called the Mahdī will appear at the end of time. Etymologically, the term "Mahdī" or "the rightly guided one" is derived from the Arabic root "*h-d-y*". This root is originally mentioned in the first verse of the second *sūrah* of the Qur'ān: "This Book [i.e., the Qur'ān], no doubt, is guidance (*hudan*) for the pious ones" (2: 1). Both

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the Qur'ān and the Prophetic traditions (*aḥādīth*), in our view, provide strong grounds to expect the appearance of someone who, both in his thought and deed, represents this "guidance" and turns it into a vibrant reality. The word Mahdī as the title of a person is not mentioned in the Qur'ān. Many verses, however, refer to the *muhtadūn* ("the people who are rightly guided").[1] The Mahdī and the *muhtadūn* both share the same meaning as they emanate from a common root "*h-d-y*", or "guidance". According to the Arabic lexicon, "Mahdī" means "the person who is guided by God to the truth".[2] Thus, anyone who follows the true path could theoretically be called "*mahdī*", but without necessarily signifying that *mahdī* who will come at the end of time. To indicate this distinction between Mahdī in the above sense and the other rightly guided persons who follow the right guidance is indicated by addix '*al-*' before the word Mahdī. The use of the word with this prefix indicates that the person signified is the Mahdī of the former category.

Since the Qur'ān, the primary source of Islam, does not explicitly use the term "Mahdī" even though it uses words derived from the root *h-d-y*, the issue becomes somewhat complicated. Many questions arise regarding the person of the Mahdī, the number of the Mahdīs, and the time of his/their appearance.

In traditions from the Prophet (peace be on him) the plural form of the term has been used, it has been suggested that *mahdī*s have spiritual levels of progress, as indicated in the *aḥādīth*. When the Prophet (peace be on him) prayed for one of his Companions, he asked God to raise him to the level of the *mahdī*s, without using the prefix *al;* instead, he used the word in its plural form.[3] Since the Prophet (peace be on him) uses the plural form, it is understood that here reference has not been made to the Mahdī who will appear at the end of time. In some instances, the Prophet (peace be on him) used the word *mahdiyyūn*, the plural form of *mahdī*, for his four caliphs: Abū Bakr (d. 13/634), 'Umar (d. 23/644), 'Uthmān (d. 35/656) and 'Alī (d. 40/661). In the tradition narrated by 'Irbāḍ ibn Sāriyah, the Prophet (peace be on him) says: "Surely, if you live, you will see many differences of opinion. I am warning you about *bid'ah* (innovation) in religion. Surely, it is an error.

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[1] See Qur'ān 3: 51-56, 90; 6: 82 and 4: 175.

[2] Abū 'l-Faḍl ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'Arab* (Beirut: Ḍār Ṣādir & Dār Bayrūt, 1956), 15: 354. Ibn Manẓūr says that the word Mahdī becomes a common personal name. Thus, the person whose coming at the end of time has been prophesied by the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) has been called al-Mahdī.

[3] See for the full text of this *ḥadīth*, Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjaj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Janā'iz, Bāb fī Ighmāḍ al-Mayyiṭ wa 'l-Du'ā' lahu idhā Ḥaḍar; Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn Ash'ath al-Sajistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Kitāb al-Janā'iz, Bāb Taghmīḍ al-Mayyit; Aḥmad b. Muḥammed ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, Kitāb Bāqī Musnad al-Anṣār, Bāb Ḥadīth umm Salamah Zawj al-Nabiyy. It is to note that the Prophet (peace be on him) used the word *'al-Mahdiyyīn'*. Ed.

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Therefore, follow my path and the path of my rightly guided successors (*mahdiyyīn*)".[4] Presumably, because the Prophet (peace be on him) used the term "*mahdī*" for his successors, in the minds of most Muslims the term became associated with a powerful figure who was going to rule and bring justice to people. If the four rightly guided caliphs of Islam were *mahdī*s ("rightly guided"), as many Muslims believe them to be, then the Mahdī is not merely one person, although the majority of Muslims expect him to be one such person. Therefore, one can see how the concept of the Mahdī has been quite complex from the very early period of Islam, and even the traditions on the subject have lent themselves to a variety of interpretations.

In the second half of the seventh century, according to W. Madelung, the Mahdī was first given messianic connotations after the death of the Ummayyad caliph Mu'āwiyah (d. 60/680).[5] This was probably because people were looking forward to someone who could bring justice in that disturbed time, and this expectation translated itself into the conception of the Mahdī.

As a distinctive eschatological theme, the Mahdī is very similar to the Davidic Messiah of Judaism and to the Christian Jesus, whose second coming is awaited.[6] Traditionally speaking, in Islam the Mahdī is conceived as the leader of the believers; his opponents are mostly unbelievers, specifically the Dajjāl, the anti-Christ, and his followers, whom the Mahdī will fight and defeat with God's support. The eschatological struggle, or Armageddon, will occur between the anti-Christ and his followers on one side, and Jesus (peace be on him), the Mahdī, and their followers on the other. The united forces of the Mahdī and Jesus (peace be on him) will "easily" defeat the anti-Christ.[7]

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[4] See for the full text of this *ḥadīth*, Abū 'Īsā Muḥammad ibn 'Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, Kitāb al-'Ilm 'an Rasūl Allāh, Bāb mā Jā' fī 'l-Akhdh bi 'l-Sunnah wa Ijtināb al-Bid'a; Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Yazīd Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Kitāb al-Muqaddimah, Bāb Itbā' Sunnat al-Khulafā' al-Rāshidīn al-Mahdiyyīn; Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, Kitāb Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn, Bāb Ḥadīth al-'Ibāḍ ibn Sāriyah 'an al-Nabiyy; Abū Muḥammad 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dāramī, *Sunan al-Dāramī*, Kitāb al-Muqaddimah, Bāb Itbā' al-Sunnah.

[5] W. Madlung, "al-Mahdī" in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd Edn. [henceforth *EI*^{2}] (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986), V: 1290.

[6] Especially in the Shī'ite tradition, the Davidic Messiah bears a certain similarity to the notion of the Mahdī entertained by the Shī'ites, one who will be a descendant of 'Alī. 'Alī plays a role parallel to David, and 'Alī's offspring, Mahdī, is similar to David's offspring, the Messiah. (I owe it to Maria Dakake, Professor of Islamic Studies at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, USA who provided this information during a discussion with this writer on the topic of Mahdi).

[7] Anti-Christ will be as easily defeated by the Mahdī and Jesus as salt melts in water, according to a tradition. See Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Ashrāṭ al-Sā'ah, Bāb fī Fatḥ Qusṭanṭīniyyah wa Khurūj al-Dajjāl wa Nuzūl 'Īsā ibn Maryam.

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Early Sunnī sources record several traditions from the Prophet (peace be on him), about the appearance and attributes of the Mahdī: he will be from the Prophet Muḥammad's family; he will appear at the end of time; he will be an *imām*;[8] he will be a caliph.[9] Even though there is no reference to the Mahdī in Abū Hurayrah's famous *ḥadīth*[10] which mentions the ten signs of the Final Hour, in another tradition recorded by Ibn Mājah the Mahdī is mentioned with the title, "Caliph of God".[11] Perhaps because some traditions associate the Mahdī with caliphs, the Mahdī came to be seen as a great Muslim leader at the end of time. Therefore, the Mahdī was associated with such historical leaders of the early Islamic period as 'Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr (d. 72/691) (who fought against the oppression of Ḥajjāj (d. 95/714), the governor of 'Irāq, and with 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz (d. 101/ 720)[12]. In the traditions about the trials that will be encountered at the end of time (the *malāḥim* traditions), the Mahdī is described as the political leader of the entire world. Among Muslims, however, the Mahdī is generally conceived as a person who will govern an Islamic state. Based on this notion, the Mahdī became the focus of attention as a messianic political figure.[13]

Muslims perceive the Mahdī almost as a supernatural personality, and one can see many traditions purporting this quality of the Mahdī. He is represented as being so extraordinary that, he will be able to establish justice on earth with his sword in a very short period of time. The various interpretations of the extraordinary personality of the Mahdī mentioned in some later interpretations of early traditions, is problematic. For this reason, some modern scholars tend to deny the very idea of the Mahdī, claiming that it is mythical, that there is no reliable basis for it in the primary Islamic sources. They believe that even the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him),

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[8] See for the full text, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Ashrāṭ al-Sā'ah, Bāb lā taqūm al-Sā'ah Ḥattā yamurru al-Rajul.

[9] Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Anbiyā, Bāb Nuzūl 'Īsā ibn Maryam.

[10] See for the full text, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Ashrāṭ al-Sā'ah, Bāb fī 'l-Āyāt allatī takūn Qabla al-Sā'ah.

[11] Muḥammad ibn Yazid Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Kitāb al-Fitan, Bāb Khurūj al-Mahdī.

[12] Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728), an earlier theologian and Ṣūfī opposed the belief in the coming of the Mahdī, but contended that, if there were one, it would be 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz. (See Madelung, "al-Mahdī", *EI*^{2}, V: 1234).

[13] See O. Blichfeldt, *Early Mahdism: Politics, and Religion in the Formative Period of Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985); Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law*, trs., Andras and Ruth Hamory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 197–8; Wilfred Madelung, "'Abd Allah b. al-Zubair and the Mahdī" in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 40: 1 (1981), 291–305. See also John Voll, "Mahdīs, Walīs, and New Men" in N. Keddie, ed., *Scholars, Saints and Sufis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 367–84.

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who had attained the highest religious level, did not claim to be 'supernatural', and obviously it cannot be claimed that the Mahdī's status could be any higher than the Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be on him). Thus, the supernatural character of the Mahdī was rejected by these modern scholars.[14] Among those who deny the idea of the coming of the Mahdī are some modern Muslim scholars such as 'Abd al-Karīm al-Khaṭīb, and 'Abd Allāh al-Sammān. They claim that this is a supernatural idea which originally came from Christianity and Judaism and thus should not be regarded as an authentic Islamic notion.[15]

According to the Shī'ite creed, belief in the appearance of the Mahdī is one of the fundamental principles of faith. Although the Sunnīs do not

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[14] In the very early period in the history of Islam, a minor group of Muslim scholars, especially Ḥanafite scholars, denied also the appearance of the Mahdī and claimed that only Jesus (peace be on him) would come because the Mahdī and Jesus (peace be on him) share similar roles in Islamic eschatology. Therefore, according to them, there is no Mahdī but Jesus (*Lā Mahdī illā 'Īsā.).* [See Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Kitab al-Fitan, Bāb Shiddat al-Zamān.] Responding to this, Ibn Sirīn (d. 109/728), a prominent religious scholar of Baṣrah, maintained that there would be the Mahdī and there would also be Jesus (peace be on him). After descending from heaven, Jesus (peace be on him) would pray behind the Mahdī and would support his leadership. Perhaps this explains why the founder of the Ḥanafī school of law, Abū Ḥanīfah (d. 150/767), has not mentioned the appearance of the Mahdī in his famous book, *al-Fiqh al-Akbar,* when he listed the contents of the Islamic creed. [See Arent J. Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed: Its Genesis and Historical Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1932), 244.] A later theologian, Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 792/1390) argued that, according to the sounder view, the Mahdī will pray behind Jesus (peace be on him), for the latter, as a prophet, surpasses the former in religious rank. This view was rejected by Abū 'l-Abbās Aḥmad bin Ḥajar al-Haythamī (d. 972/1565) in favour of the view that the initial prayer of Jesus (peace be on him) behind the Mahdī was meant to signify the former's subjection to the rule of Islam, rather than the superiority of the Mahdī [See, Aḥmad ibn Hajar al-Haythamī, *al-Qawl al-Mukhtaṣar fī 'Alāmāt al-Mahdī al-Muntaẓar,* ed., Muḥammad Zaynahum Muḥammad 'Azab (Cairo: Dār al-Ṣaḥwah, 1407/1986), 40–43.] Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) seems to entertain some reservations about the traditions pertaining to the appearance of the Mahdī. He says: "They have been critically discussed by those who disapprove of the matter and have often been refuted by means of certain other traditions". One might conclude from this statement that at least some traditions concerning the Mahdī are not refuted, as he does not say that all of the traditions have been refuted. Therefore, despite the weaknesses of the traditions, the idea of the Mahdī is not something that was transplanted into Islam. Ibn Khaldūn also discusses the issue of leadership in the prayer and the killing of the anti-Christ when Jesus (peace be on him) and the Mahdī meet. In fact, he is not definite about who would kill the anti-Christ. He implies this by using "or" in saying: ". . . or Jesus (peace be on him) will descend together with the Mahdī and help him to kill the anti-Christ and have him as the leader in his prayers". [See Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, ed. 'Abd al-Wāḥid al-Wāfī (Cairo: Lajnat al-Bayān al-'Arabī, 1965), 2: 900, 788. See also Aḥmad Amīn, *al-Mahdi wa al-Mahdawiyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1954), 39.] Here Amīn asserts that the notion of Mahdī originally entered among the ranks of the Sunnīs from the Shī'ite tratidiotn.

[15] See 'Abd al-Karīm al-Khāṭib *al-Mahdī al-Muntaẓar wa man Yantaẓirūnah* (Cairo: Dār al-Jīl, 1980), 14, 82, 112 and 'Abd Allāh al-Sammān, *al-Islām al-Muṣaffā* (Cairo: n.a., n.d.), 90–91.

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consider it to be a fundamental principle of faith, they believe that the Mahdī will certainly come at the end of time to redeem the world and fill it with justice, as the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) once did.[16] It can be argued that this expectation of justice was inspired by some Qur'ānic verses on the subject of hope as well as some traditions from the Prophet (peace be on him). There is little doubt that one can find roots of the Mahdī idea in the Qur'ānic verses relating to the hope for a better social order in the future for the actualization of justice and for the flowering of a perfect life of the Hereafter.[17]

Because of the persistentce of the idea of hope throughout the history of Islam, many notable persons were promoted as Mahdīs. This is because the Mahdī is envisioned as a very significant figure who will bring about religious restoration. Consequently, various social and religious movements have tried to identify themselves with him. As a result, we encouner the Mahdī phenomenon from time to time in one Muslim land or the other. Several movements in Africa and India began under the leadership of Mahdī figures such as Muḥammad Aḥmad, the Mahdī of Sūdān (d. 1302/1885), and Mirzā Ghūlām Aḥmad of India (d. 1326/1908), who before making his more ambitious claims to prophethood, etc., declared himself to be the Mahdī.[18]

The Concept of the Mahdī in Early Islam

Islamic concepts, as we know, are basically derived from two sources: the Qur'ān and the traditions (*aḥādīth*). To pursue the idea of the Mahdī, both sources would need to be explored. As previously stated, the Mahdī has not been explicitly mentioned in the Qur'ān, but possibly it has been mentioned implicitly. As for traditions from the Prophet, the case is different: the Mahdī has been mentioned in several *aḥādīth*, both sound and weak. The most authoritative sources in the corpus of *Ḥadīth*, the collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim, do not mention the Mahdī by name. In Abū Dāwūd's *Sunan*, however, we find the following as the title of a chapter: "Kitāb al-Mahdī" (The Book Concerning the Mahdī). The Mahdī, the caliph and *imām*, despite some variations in matters of detail, have the same essential role — to overcome injustice.[19]

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[16] Sa'd Muḥammad Ḥasan, *al-Mahdiyyah fī 'l-Islām mundh Aqdam al-'Uṣūr Ḥattā 'l-Yawm* (Cairo: Maṭba'ah al-Khayriyyah, 1953), 176–77.

[17] See Qur'ān 58: 21 and 43: 25, 28: 83.

[18] See Sa'd Muḥammad Ḥasan, *al-Mahdiyyah fī 'l-Islām mundh Aqdam al-'Uṣūr Ḥattā 'l-Yawm*, 81–273.

[19] For the *imām* see al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-Anbiyā'. Bāb Nuzūl 'Īsā ibn Maryam. Al-Taftāzānī interprets the *imām* mentioned here as the Mahdī. See Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī,

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Other compilers of *Ḥadīth* have specifically recorded several traditions about the Mahdī in their collections.[20] In the early period of Islam, especially in the era of civil war, there are many traditions. Some ideas about the apparence of the Mahdī are recorded in reliable *Ḥadīth* sources; others are found in less reliable sources. The persecution of the family of the Prophet led to the inflation of *aḥādīth* on the subject. After this period, there are not many references, in particular, devoted to the concept of Mahdī. Until the 14th century, there are some references in Ibn Khaldūn. Ibn Khaldūn, the famous historian and sociologist, claimed that the idea of the Mahdī was generally accepted by Muslims in every epoch. The essence of the idea was that at the end of time, a man from the family of the Prophet (peace be on him) will appear and will strengthen the true faith and make justice triumphant. Muslims will follow him and he will gain dominion over the world. Thereafter the Dajjāl, the anti-Christ, will appear, and so will appear the other signs of the Final Hour as mentioned in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections of *Ḥadīth*, namely al-Bukhari and Muslim's chapters on the *Fitan*. After the appearance of the Mahdī, Jesus (peace be on him) will descend and will kill the anti-Christ.[21]

The later interpretations of the *aḥādith*s further clarify the idea of the Mahdī. They indicate the time and even the location of his appearance as well as the socio-political situation obtaining at the time of his appearance, namely, that there will be moral degeneracy and social and political disorder. Similarly, the physical appearance of the Mahdī has been described in detail. He will have brown eyes, teeth of extreme whiteness, a beauty mark on his cheek, and will be born in Madīnah of a slave-girl. There has been some controversy as regards the place of his appearance, but Morocco, Kūfah, and Damascus are mentioned among the possible places.[22]

The Mahdī in the Corpus of *Ḥadīth*

A famous tradition going back to Ibn Mas'ūd explicitly emphasizes the

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Sharḥ al-Maqāṣid, ed., 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Umayrah (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, 1989), 5: 314. The term Khalīfah is mentioned in Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Ashrāṭ al-Sā'ah, Bāb lā taqūm al-Sā'ah Ḥattā yamurru al-Rajul.

[20] See for instance the collections of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/857), Ibn Mājah (d. 273/887), al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), Abū Dāwūd al-Sajistānī (d. 275/889), Aḥmad al-Bazzār (d. 292/904), Abū Ya'lā al-Mawṣilī (d. 307/919), al-Ṭabarānī (d. 360/971), Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 431/1040).

[21] 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn Khaldūn, *Al-Muqaddimah*, 2: 591–92. For these traditions, see Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Ashrāṭ al-Sā'ah, Bāb Fatḥ Qusṭanṭīniyyah wa Khurūj al-Dajjāl wa Nuzūl 'Īsā ibn Maryam.

[22] See, Abū Dāwūd al-Sajistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Kitāb al-Mahdī, *ḥadīth* no. 6; Aḥmad ibn Ḥajar al-Haythamī, *al-Qawl al-Mukhtaṣar*, 34, 39, 43, 44, 50, 51.

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similarity between the Mahdī and the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). According to this tradition, the Prophet said: "If the world had no more than one day remaining, God would make that day last in order to send a man from my family, whose name will be the same as my name, and the name of his father will be the same as the name of my father".[23] While in another version of the same tradition, the establishment of justice has been emphasized. The emphasis in the present *ḥadīth* is on the Mahdī as being one of the offspring of the Prophet (peace be on him). It is also narrated that 'Alī, referring to his son, Ḥasan (d. 61/680), once said:

> This son of mine is a *sayyid*, , as he was called by the Messenger of God. From his offspring, there will come forth a man who will be called by the name of the Prophet [Muḥammad], one who will not resemble him physically, but will resemble him in character. 'Alī then mentioned the prophesy: "He will fill the earth with justice".[24]

In another *ḥadīth*, the Prophet (peace be on him) specifically mentions the Mahdī as a member of his family. "The Mahdī is from us (*minnā ahl al-bayt).* God will give him success in one night".[25]

While in these traditions the Prophet (peace be on him) emphasizes that the Mahdī would be one of his descendants, in other traditions one finds emphasis on the physical attributes of the Mahdī and the span of his reign. He reportedly said: "The Mahdī has a bald forehead and an aquiline nose; he will fill the earth with equity and justice as it had been filled with injustice and oppression. He will rule for seven years".[26]

According to a tradition on the same subject, the expectation of the Mahdī's coming is "good news" for Muslims. It is reported that some Companions of the Prophet (peace be on him) became afraid of the trouble that might ensue after the latter's demise. As they asked him about the coming trials, the promise of the Mahdī was a reassuring answer. The Prophet (peace be on him) said: "At the end of my community, there will be a caliph who will not count money, but will distribute it without counting".[27]

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[23] Abū Dāwūd al-Sajistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Kitāb al-Mahdī, *ḥadīth* no. 3.

[24] Ibid., *ḥadīth* no. 9. Rosenthal has, in my opinion, given an erroneous translation of this passage, perhaps confusing the word *khalqan*, which means physically, with *khuluqan*, which means morally and spiritually. See the Arabic edition of *al-Muqaddimah*, 2: 900. For the English translation see 2: 163–4.

[25] Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Kitāb al-Fitan, Bāb Khurūj al-Mahdī.

[26] Abū Dāwūd al-Sajistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Kitāb al-Mahdī, *ḥadīth* no. 6.

[27] Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Fitan wa Ashrāṭ al-Sā'ah, Bāb lā taqūm al-Sā'ah Ḥattā yamurru al-Rajul. See also Ibn Mājah, *Sunnan Ibn Mājah*, Kitāb al-Fitan, Bāb Khurūj al-Mahdī. Aḥmad b.

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It is generally believed that the Mahdī will appear at a time of anarchy and chaos that will precede the end of the world.[28] One of the most exhaustive traditions about the Mahdī is narrated by 'Alī, who states the following:

> The Mahdī is the one who will appear at the end of time when people will be afraid to mention the name of God. God will bring people who are scattered like stray clouds together to follow the Mahdī, who will unite them. They will be neither sad nor happy over anyone who joins them. Their number will be like the number of the fighters in the Battle of Badr. They will also be like the number of the companions of Saul, who crossed the river with him.[29]

A tradition about a group that will keep to the path of righteousness is considered to refer to the community of the Mahdī. The Prophet explains: "There will be a community, following the way of truth, until the Day of Judgment. (*Lā tazālu ṭa'ifatun ẓāhirīna 'alā 'l-ḥaqq ḥattā ya'tī 'llāh bi amrih*)".[30]

Interpretation of the Mahdī by Ibn al-'Arabī

Some Ṣūfīs, such as Ibn al-'Arābī (d. 637/1240), go further by asserting that one Qur'ānic verse refers to the emergence of the Mahdī in messianic terms by presenting him as one of the signs of al-Qiyāmah.[31] Like some earlier Ṣūfīs, Ibn al-'Arabī accepted the concept of the Mahdī. However, his opinion about the Mahdī is completely different from the classical-traditionalist belief. According to Ibn al-'Arabī, the Mahdī is a very powerful spiritual person. The mystery of the Mahdī's power lies in his faith and sincerity. The Mahdī, as a follower of the Prophet (peace be on him), will not be defeated, for the prophets have never been defeated. Ibn al-'Arabī thought that there could not be any weakness in the hearts of the Mahdī's followers. Since the Mahdī would know this, he would be the most sincere person among the people of his time. He would use the most holy and beautiful names of God in his prayers; and with

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Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad*, Kitāb Bāqī Musnad al-Mukthirīn, Bāb Musnad Abī Sa'īd al-Khudrī and Bāb Musnad Jābir ibn 'Abd Allāh.

[28] Abū 'l-Fidā Ismā'īl ibn Kathīr, *Nihāyat al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah fi 'l-Fitan wa al-Malāḥim*, (Beirut: Dar al-Jīl, 1988) 2: 19.

[29] For details about the tradition, see Ibn Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah*, 2: 787–8 (Arabic edition). I have quoted from the Rosenthal translation of *al-Muqaddimah* with some modification.

[30] Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Kitāb al-Imārah, Bāb lā tazālu Ṭā'ifatun min Ummatī. This *ḥadīth* has been quoted and interpreted by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (d. 1379/1960) in his writings called *Risale-i Nur*. See Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Kulliyati* (Istanbul: Nesil Yayinlari, 1999), 2: 1581.

[31] Ibn al-'Arabī, *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 3: 329.

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the names of God, he and his followers would be able to achieve many things.[32]

Ibn al-'Arabī focused not only on the person of the Mahdī, but also on his followers and helpers. He described the would-be Mahdī as a descendant of Ḥasan, the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him), and as the "seal of the saints" (*khātam al-awliyā'*), just as the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) was the "seal of the prophets" (*khātam al-anbiyā'*). The coming of the Mahdī, in Ibn al-'Arabī's opinion, would be one of the signs preceding Doomsday. Also, certain historical events would occur during the time of the Mahdī, including the conquest of Rome and Constantinople and the biggest ever war. But Ibn al-'Arabī, however, does not mention many specific details about this war. It seems that he had a vision regarding the length of the expected Mahdī's rule and the number of his helpers, but he failed to reveal them due to what he terms as a covenant with God. The Mahdī, furthermore, does not become angry except for God's sake. Even when he is angry, he never transgresses justice. He is infallible in his intellectual legal endeavour (*ijtihād*) for which he need not have recourse to analogical reasoning (*qiyās*), and the jurists (*fuqahā'*) are his opponents. He represents and brings the mercy of God to humankind just as the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) did.[33]

Thus, Ibn al-'Arabī's explanation of the coming of the Mahdī, differs from the general Sunnī view. Most Muslims believe that the Mahdī will establish justice by means of his physical prowess and military strength, whereas Ibn al-'Arabī believes that the power of the Mahdī lies in a strong faith in God and honesty. In the opinion of Ibn al-'Arabī, the Mahdī would not be a political ruler, although the majority of Muslims perceive him to be so. Also, Ibn al-'Arabī foretells a period of peace and tranquillity within the hearts of the believers at the time of the Mahdī. Therefore, Ibn al-'Arabī believes that the Mahdī can be a figure outside the political arena.

As for the more traditional, mainstream Sunnī view, there persists a significant controversy regarding the origin of the idea of the Mahdī. To encompass these controversies is, however, beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we shall now turn to a study of the common features of the notion of the Mahdī in Sunnī Islam.

The Mahdī Figures in Muslim History

Some outstanding persons is the course of Islam's history were conceived from time to time as Mahdīs. Some of them, of their own accord, to be Mahdīs,

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 331–337.

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whereas others were promoted as such by their followers and admirers. Perhaps the first claim came from Mukhtār al-Thaqafī (d. 67/687), who proclaimed that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah (d. 80/700), the third son of ʻAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, was the Mahdī. Mukhtār claimed that he himself was a prophet and, by implication, that he was the real Mahdī.[34] Some even considered him to be a false prophet.[35] Mukhtār also maintained that he was the expected messiah, but when he saw that no one followed him, he tried to change his position by claiming that Ibn al-Ḥanafiyyah was the expected Mahdī on account of his descent from the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). He also claimed that the nature of his relationship with Ibn al-Hanafiyyah was that of Aaron's relationship with Moses. In this regard he cited the following verse about him in the Qur'ān: "We gave Moses the book [the Torah] and appointed Aaron together with him as his helper" (25: 30).[36]

In the eighth century, ʻUmar ibn ʻAbd al-ʻAzīz was held by some to be the expected Mahdī.[37] During his reign (98-101/717–720), he was famous for his tolerance toward the Shīʻites and his just policies toward non-Muslims (*dhimmīs*). People saw the attributes of the expected Mahdī as a religious and political ruler in the personage of this pious caliph. Some went as far as to fabricate traditions to support their claim of being Mahdī. For example, in the year 129/747, Ḥārith b. al-Shurayḥ claimed that he was the Mahdī. He fabricated a tradition about himself: "A believer [*mu'min*] will appear and his name will be Ḥārith".[38]

In the same century, during the early ʻAbbāsid period, the expectations about the appearance of the expected Mahdī were quite widespread and it was common to address the ruler as "Mahdī." For example, the first ʻAbbāsid caliph, Abū 'l-ʻAbbās al-Saffāḥ (r. 131-136/749–754), was addressed as the Mahdī of the Hāshimites. The second ʻAbbāsid caliph, Abū Jaʻfar al-Manṣūr (136-158/754–775), was also called the Mahdī. He named his son Muḥammad al-Mahdī, hoping that he would be accepted by people as the expected Mahdī.

Coming to the twelfth century, in North Africa the Berber religious and military leader, ʻAbd Allāh ibn Tūmart (d. 524/1130), was promoted as the expected Mahdī. He established his movement on the principle of

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[34] Saʻd Muḥammad Ḥasan, *al-Mahdiyyah fi 'l-Islām*, 179.

[35] Ibid.

[36] On this question see Goitein, *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 194–6. See also al-Baghdādī, *al-Farq Bayn al-Firaq* (Cairo: Maktabat Maṣābīḥ, n.d.), 38–41.

[37] See for example, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *Risale-i Nur*, 1: 393.

[38] Ibn Saʻd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Beirut: Dār Bayrūt, 1978), 5: 248.

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"commanding the good and prohibiting the evil (*al-amr bi al-ma'rūf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar*).[39]

In India, the arrival of the second millennium of the Islamic era triggered popular expectations of the coming of a *mahdī* or *mujaddid* who would establish justice, revive the faith, and lead the people according to God's guidance. One such figure was Sayyid Muḥammad Jaunpūrī (846-909/1443–1504), who had a number of influential disciples during the reign of Akbar (963-1013/1556–1605)[40]. There were also Mahdī movements — Mahdawiyyah and Raushaniyyah — each claiming that its respective leader was the Mahdī. The Mahdawiyyah was founded by the above-mentioned Sayyid Muḥammad, who became influential as Mahdī by the end of the fifteenth century CE. He declared his claim to be the Mahdī in (900/1495) during his journey to Makkah for pilgrimage. Upon his return to Ahmadabad in India in 1499, he reasserted this claim and incurred the hostility of religious scholars. 'Alī al-Muttaqī al-Hindi's (975/1567) book about the signs of the Mahdī was written specifically to debunk the claims of Sayyid Muḥammad.[41]. The other movement, Raushaniyyah, was started in the sixteenth century by Bāyazīd ibn 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 979/1572), who was associated in his early life with Hindu yogis and claimed to be a Mahdī.[42] These Indian Mahdist movements differed, however, from those in Africa. For the most part, the former did not believe in using power to bring about justice, although that is often perceived to be one of the tasks that would be performed by the Mahdī.

Important Mahdist movements emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in different parts of the Islamic world. Perhaps the anti-colonial movements wanted to be perceived as guided by a messianic saviour or reformer. 'Uthmān dan Fodio (d. 1232/1817) in West Africa, the Bāb Mirzā 'Alī Muḥammad (d. 1266/1850) in Persia, and the Muḥammad Aḥmad in the Sudan, were all very powerful leaders who were promoted by their followers as Mahdīs.[43]

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[39] See Abū Bakr ibn 'Alī Sunhājī, *Akhbar al-Mahdī ibn Tūmart wa Bidāyat Dawlat al-Muwaḥḥidīn* (Rabat: Dār al-Manṣūr, 1971), 112.

[40] See Ian Henderson Douglas in Gail Minault and Christian W. Troll, eds., *Abul Kalam Azad: An Intellectual and Religious Biography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 4.

[41] See 'Alā' al-Dīn 'Ali al-Mutlaqī al-Hindī *al-Burhān fi 'Alāmāt Mahdī Ākhar al-Zamān* (Qum: Maktabat al-Khayyām, 1979).

[42] Aziz Ahmad, *An Intellectual History of Islam in India* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1969), 27–31.

[43] There is no doubt that the most influential person to promote himself as the Mahdī was the Mahdī of Sudan. He formed an army against the British and became the head of the state for a dozen years. In the year 1881, he proclaimed himself to be the expected Mahdī. During his fight against the British army, General Charles George Gordon was captured and killed in Khartoum, the capital city of the Sudan. The movement of the Sudanese Mahdī was also directed against Muslim rulers and even the scholars (*'ulamā'*) of al-Azhar, who were generally against the Ṣūfīs.

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In Punjab, towards the end of the nineteenth century, a new group (which was quite different than the previous mahdist movement, in so far as the claim not only asserted that he was the *Mahdī*, but his claim was to be a prophet, and even an incarnation of Jesus. The group) flourished under the leadership of Mirzā Ghulām Aḥmad Qādiyānī, the founder of the Aḥmadiyyah Movement. Although at first Ghulām Aḥmad opposed the British, in the early part of his life, he later reconciled with them. In 1889, Ghulām Aḥmad claimed to be both al-Masīḥ (Jesus, the Messiah) and Mahdī. In 1904, he claimed to be an incarnation of the Hindu god Krishna, as well as Jesus (peace be on him), returned to earth, and at the same time a re-manifestation of Muḥammad (peace be on him). Not surprisingly, he claimed that God sent revelation directly to him.[44]

Mahdīs have continued to pose problems well into the twentieth century. Even some Muslim political leaders of the century came to be considered as Mahdīs. One of the scholars of al-Azhar University in Egypt claimed that Jamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir (d. 1970) was the expected Mahdī. Addressing him, he is quoted as follows: "In your reign, government is by consultation. Wealth is common. Human beings are equal. You are sent to us by God as the Mahdī to fight against oppression and to bring about justice on Earth".[45]

In 1979, an important event occurred in the Muslim world — the occupation of the Ka'bah. It was an attempt made by the an influential Najdī religious personality, Juhaymān al-'Utaybī. Juhaymān, along with some of his followers, used the Ka'bah as the staging-ground to proclaim his Mahdīship in expectation of a messianic war. He did not claim *mahdīship* for himself but for another person. As reported by *Le Monde*, some students at the University of Riyadh wrote on the wall of their university: "Our martyr, Juhaymān, why did you not destroy the palaces? The war is beginning".[46] Seeing the appearance of this example, one cannot help but predict new figures arising in the future, each claiming to be the expected Mahdī.

He asserted that the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) had appeared to him in a vision and had appointed him as a leader of *jihād* against the non-believers. He also claimed direct descent from the Prophet on both sides of his family and maintained that he received revelation directly from God as to the prohibition of alcohol and cigarettes. See Aḥmad Amīn, *al-Mahdī wa al-Mahdawiyyah*, 78–9.

[44] See Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 81–95.

[45] Aḥmad Ḥasan al-Zayyāt, "Sayyidī al-Ra'īs", Editorial, *Majallat al-Azhar*, vol. 34 (January, 1963), 573–575, Qouted in P. J. Vatikiotis, "Islam and the Foreign Policy of Egypt" in J. Harris Proctor, *Islam and International Relations* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1965), 120–57 especially 142–143.

[46] Ibid., 183.

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The Intellectual Environment of the Mahdī Discussion

Certain factors have played a vital role in shaping the conceptions about the Mahdī's personality. The debate on theological and ideological problems in early Islamic history had split up people into different groups in different cities such as Baghdad and Damascus. These two cities in particular were rivals, perhaps because of the struggle between two imprtan figures — 'Alī and Mu'awiyyah. Damascus was the headquarter of Mu'āwiyyah, while Kūfah and indirectly Baghdad was the headquarter of 'Alī and his supporters. In early Islamic history, one could always find a person from any religious or sectarian position with whom to argue. The society was culturally very rich. Individuals could be found to discuss practically any religious sect, including Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Christianity, etc. There were also many themes which were discussed, including the concept of the Mahdī. This idea was not strange to many Christians who were part of this society. The ideological and theological trends of the leaders and intellectuals had doubtlessly already impacted the ideas about the expected Mahdī. In some cases, each group of people may have thought of its own leader as the Mahdī and may have applied to him the attributes mentioned in the Prophetic traditions. Alternatively, they may have made up traditions and then applied them to their own leaders. The social and cultural environment also influenced the different conceptions regarding the physical attributes of the Mahdī.

It would be inaccurate to say that the idea of the Mahdī has no relation with any religion other than Islam. The messianic ideas of both Judaism and Christianity possibly influenced the Muslims' ideas of the Mahdī. An important figure in this regard was Ka'b al-Aḥbār (d. 10/632), a Jewish scholar who converted to Islam and lived in Madīnah. He is said to have narrated some traditions bearing on eschatological events with reference to the Mahdī. Even in regard to Islam's inception, Ka'b is reported to have said that Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyyah was the Mahdī.[47] This reference gives us some clue as to the historical roots of Mahdism and the influence of Ka'b and other pre-Islamic scholars. As the famous scholar and interpreter of the Qur'ān, Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273) has stated, there was a theological competition between Muslims and non-Muslims in the early centuries of Islam. Imām al-Bāqir, the prominent Shī'ite *imām* (d. 117/736) is reported to have said to the People of the Book: "For our Mahdī's appearance, there are two signs that have never existed since God created the heavens and

[47] Abū al-Faraj 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Aṣbahānī, *Kitāb al-Āghānī* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭibā'ah al-Amīriyyah, 1285 AH), 8: 33.

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the earth. One of them is the solar eclipse in the middle of Ramaḍān, and the second is the lunar eclipse at the beginning of Ramaḍān".[48]

Here, the term, "our Mahdī" presupposes the existence of other Mahdīs and implies the idea of the existence of "their Mahdīs'". Therefore, it seems evident that there must have been some discussion between Muslims and the People of the Book on the identity of the messianic figure. Most likely, each group was proud of the role and qualities of its own Mahdī.

A tradition in al-Bukhārī's *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* also reflects the influence of Jews and Christians on Muslim society. This tradition is narrated by Abū Hurayrah, a famous Companion of the Prophet, who expresses his grievance with the People of the Book: "The People of the Book were reading the Torah in Hebrew and interpreting it in Arabic for Muslims".[49] Although the five books of Moses in the Torah do not explicitly discuss the Messiah, it is possible to say that the Talmudic interpretation of the messianic figure, the saviour of the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible, was translated into Arabic by scholars who had converted to Islam. This idea was thereafter transmitted further on by Muslim narrators without there being any objection from other Muslims, out of respect for their scholarly position. They were respectful because of their knowledge. Their knowledge was not refined by the Islamic tradition and the Qur'anic teachings. Different ideas and some strange beliefs came via these convert scholars to the teachings of Islam, at least as far as messianics are concerned. This seems to be borne out by the following complaint of 'Abd Allāh ibn al-'Abbās, (d. 68/687), a famous Companion and cousin of the Prophet:

> Why do you ask the People of the Book about some issues despite the fact that the Book that was sent to your messenger [the Prophet Muḥammad] is the most recent? The Book that we read will never become old. Your Book [the Qur'ān], tells you that the People of the Book have changed the Book of God. They wrote the book by their own hands and said: This is, from God'.[50]

On the one hand, the debate about the expected saviour began to take place, and on the other the persecution of the family of the Prophet (peace be on him) continued. In both the Umayyad and 'Abbāsid periods, members of

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[48] Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Tadhkirah*, ed., Aḥmad Ḥijāzī al-Saqqā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1985), 619.

[49] Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb Tafsīr al-Qur'ān, Bāb qūlū Āmannā bi Allāh wa mā unzila Ilaynā; Kitāb al-I'tiṣām bi 'l-Kitāb wa al-Sunnah, Bāb Qawl al-Nabiyy lā tas'alū Ahl al-Kitāb 'an Shay'; Kitāb al-Tawḥīd, Bāb mā yajūz min Tafsīr al-Tawrāt wa Ghayrihā min Kutub Allāh.

[50] Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Kitāb al-I'tiṣām bi 'l-Kitāb wā al-Sunnah, Bāb Qawl al-Nabiyy lā tas'alū Ahl al-Kitāb 'an Shay'; al-Qurṭubī, *al-Tadhkirah*, 612.

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the Prophet's family and their followers were persecuted by the rulers, causing them considerable suffering. At its height, Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī, the youngest grandson of the Prophet, was put to the sword. There is no doubt that this persecution nurtured the idea of the expected Mahdī in the Islamic community to bring justice to the society, as traditions regarding such incidents were widely spread among the Muslims, especially among those who suffered persecution. These circumstances also led to the creation of some fabricated traditions as well. Therefore, we have both kinds of traditions, in some instances, traditions even got mixed. In a tradition attributed to the Companion 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd (d. 31/652), the Prophet (peace be on him) is stated to be perturbed by the future suffering of his family:

> While we were with the Messenger of God, there came some youth of the Banū Hāshim. When he saw them, his eyes flowed with tears and his complexion changed. We said, "O Messenger of God, we have for some time seen in your face that something has happened that you disliked". He said: "God has chosen for us, the people of my house, the hereafter in preference to this world. The people of my house shall meet misfortune, punishment, and persecution until people come from the east with black banners. They will ask for charity, but it will not be given. Then they will fight and be victorious. Now they will be given what they had asked for, yet they will not accept it, but will finally hand the earth over to a man of my family. He will fill it with justice as they had filled it with injustice. Whoever of you lives to witness that, let him go there even if by crawling his way over the snow".[51]

The suffering of the Prophet's family in early Islam caused much pain to a very large number of Muslims. As a result, they were psychologically prepared to welcome the rise of the person who would rescue them from persecution. They believed that a strong ruler, the Mahdī, would come to their rescue, and they applied what they found in the traditions as regards the physical features of the person, while adding details according to their own preferences. They added to the traditions the attributes of their leader, making the newer traditions longer than the earlier ones.

The Mahdī as an Expression of Communal Social Hope

The expectations of the appearance of the Mahdī developed in the 18th and 19th countries, when Muslim countries were occupied by Western Colonial powers. The invasion of Egypt was a cornerstone in this development. The fervour of Islamic thinkers in this direction was aroused as a result of

[51] See Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Kitāb al-Fitan, Bāb Khurūj al-Mahdī.

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Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. This resulted in the French occupation of Egypt that lasted only three years, but which nevertheless left an indelible mark upon the Islamic intelligentsia.[52] This was because Cairo, which then rivalled both Baghdad and Istanbul, was one of the key centres of Islamic civilization. Egypt's occupation by Napoleon had the force of a catalystic earthquake in the world of Islam. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr states: "It was the cosmic crisis in Muslims' mind",[53] which triggered different eschatological views and concerns among Muslims. Its end-analysis was a result of three possible logical conclusions: First, that it was the end of the world. Several books[54] about the signs of the Final Hour were written by an assortment of scholars. The *aḥādīth* about the end of the world were also brought together and published. Second, some scholars claimed that the fall of Egypt showed that while Islam had been relevant in the seventh century, it was no longer suited to the eighteenth century in which they lived. Third, another group referred to the early Muslims and emphasised how strongly God had supported them. Had the Muslims of the time been good Muslims, they contended, God would have supported them as well. They claimed that Egypt had fallen because of the Muslims' failure to duly pratice Islam.

Each of these three trends manifested itself in the fourteenth century of Islamic history/twentieth century of the Gregorian calendar. The first possibility led to the expectation of the Mahdī. The proponents of this attitude believed that it was the time for the Mahdī's advent and that he would necessarily come and restore justice and righteousness in the world. The second idea led to both modernism and liberalism in the Islamic world. The proponents of this trend blamed Islam for what had happened and invited people to free themselves from religion's hold and to embrace a modern and secular philosophy of life. The third idea led to the rise of radical movements like that of Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792), the leader of a puritanical group that originated in central Arabia.

It was ultimately in the backdrop of these social conditions following Egypt's foreign invasion that the Prophet's traditions on eschatological

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[52] For details see al-Jabartī's *Chronicle of the French Occupation*, tr., Shmuel Moreh (New York and Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishing, 1993).

[53] S.H. Nasr, in his lecture "Introduction to Islam" at George Washington University, 24 June, 1997. The three categories of derived eschatological and modernist views resulting from Egypt's fall mentioned here also come from this lecture.

[54] See Egyptian scholars Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Sālim al-Safārīnī, *al-Buḥūr al-Dhākhirah fi 'Ulūm al-Ākhirah* (Bombay: n.a., 1341 AH), 1: 923; 'Alī al-Manshalīlī, *Risālah fi Ashrāṭ al-Sā'ah* (manuscript) (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, nr. B-19690); Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥijāzī, *Sawā' al-Ṣirāṭ fi Dhikr al-Sā'ah wa al-Ashrāṭ* (manuscript) (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, Ghaybiyyāt, nr. 26).

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matters were emphatically put forth and variously interpreted. It was a time that resembled the turbulent times of the early period of Islam in which the Muslim society was convulsed. A similar situation was breaking on the shores of the second half of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the thirteenth century of the Islamic calendar.

It is evident that social and psychological factors contributed to people's expectations about the Mahdī and to the envisioning and characterizing of his personage. It is evident that socio-economic factors affected the various interpretations of the Mahdī's physical characteristics and personality. People were waiting for a person who could restore the power of the Muslims and re-conquer Egypt. Such expectations instilled in Muslims the hope for a better future. Regardless of the authenticity or otherwise of the traditions cited on the question, the idea of the Mahdī doubtlessly had a significant impact on Muslims: It raised and sustained their morale. It generated among them the confidence that eventually the wrongdoers and tyrants (such as Napoleon) would be punished, and justice would ultimately prevail.

In such crisis-ridden historical times, the idea of the Mahdī had the potential to sustain a people overwhelmed with despair, a people who felt helpless and were morally perplexed and emotionally distressed. Let us imagine for a moment that the Muslim society was devoid of the idea of Mahdī, and then consider what might have happened? Thanks to the Mahdī idea, people felt sure that God would work through a rescuer to protect and redeem them. This served to raise their hopes, and encountaged them to act. In our view, human morality and spirituality would have been crushed out under the dead weight of hopelessness. In other words, hope lifts the spirit and morale of humankind. The spread of hopelessness is dangerous to the health of all kinds of societies, including the Muslim society.

Hopelessness is considered to be one of the most socially dangerous illnesses, and it cannot be treated except by injecting a strong feeling of hope. There is a vital relationship between hope and religion. As we have mentioned earlier, hope is just one aspect of the religious phenomenon. If one looks at history, one will see that humankind cannot survive without hope, for life without hope is utterly unbearable. The hope inspired by religion is especially an antidote in circumstances when everything around seems gloomy, when grief and hardships disturb the equilibrium of people's lives; in fact, and they ravage them physically, psychologically and morally. In such circumstances, hope intertwined with faith, offers the necessary strength both to individuals and collectivities to survive the crises they encounter. As a contemporary

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Islamic scholar has said: "Faith is power; the person who has real faith can challenge the whole universe".[55]

Indeed, hope is one of the most significant virtues embedded in the Islamic paradigm. Both the Qur'ān and the *Ḥadīth* set forth hope as an indispensably desirable attribute. This means that to continue to look forward to the eternal world, or to think about a better life, is not a form of escape or wishful thinking. Were we to study history, we would find that the people who entertain such ideas are able to have impact on history. They were precisely those who were animated with hope for a better life in this world and in the hereafter.

In several verses of the Qur'ān as well as in *aḥādīth* we find that a great stress has been placed on the idea of hope. For instance, in a tradition recorded by Ibn Ḥanbal, the Prophet (peace be on him) states that the appearance of the Mahdī is an announcement of good news: "I give good tidings of the Mahdī".[56] There is also a *ḥadīth* about the *mujaddid* "renewer",[57] who will appear at the advent of every century, embodying the hope expressed by the Prophet (peace be on him) that God will never leave the community of believers without guidance; that He will support it with distinguished religious figures possessed of extraordinary moral and spiritual strength.

According to the Qur'ān, God certainly puts people to different tests of fear, hunger and loss of property, but they must remain full of hope and be patient: "... and give good news to those who patiently endure" (Qur'ān 2: 155). On the whole, the Qur'ān teaches Muslims that they should not succumb to the illusion that they would not be faced with difficult times. For this is the nature of life: ease and hardship go hand in hand.[58] But the faithful should remain optimistic about a good end even in the most difficult times, this because of their trust in God's promise to them. In this regard, the Qur'ān makes mention of the experience of the prophets who came before the time of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). "Rejected were the prophets before you with patience and constancy they bore their rejection and their persecution until Our aid did reach them" (Qur'ān 6: 34). These prophets were always hopeful about God's aid and God never abandoned them. God never leaves His people who struggle against evil in a state of despair. The Qur'ān mentions the story of the struggle between Ṭālūt (Saul), the leader of the

[55] Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, *The Words*, tr. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Publications, 1993), 322.

[56] Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad*, Kitāb Bāqī Musnad al-Mukthirīn, Bāb Musnad Abī Sa'īd al-Khudrī.

[57] Abū Dāwūd al-Sajistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Kitab al-Malāḥim, Bāb mā yudhkar fī Qarn al-Mi'ah.

[58] See Qur'ān 94: 6.

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believers, and Jālūt (Goliath), the leader of the non-believers. The followers of Ṭālūt complained that they had no power against Jālūt and his army. According to the Qur'ān: "Those who were certain that they would meet their Lord said: 'How often has a small party vanquished a numerous host by Allah's permission? And Allah is with those who patiently endure'". They were full of hope when they asked God to grant them patience against non-believers: "Our Lord! Pour down upon us patience, and make our steps firm and assist us against the unbelieving people" (Qur'ān 2: 50). The story ends with the believers defeating Jālūt and his army despite the believers' apparent lack of power.

The Qur'ān also narrates the story of the prophet Ya'qūb (Jacob) when he had lost his son, Yūsuf (Joseph). According to the Qur'ān, Ya'qūb tells his sons: "O my sons! Go and inquire about Yūsuf and his brother, and never give up hope of Allah's mercy. Certainly none despairs of Allah's mercy, except those who disbelieve" (Qur'ān 12: 87). Here the Qur'ān clearly indicates that hopelessness is a characteristic of non-believers. Despair is one of the major sins against God in Islam (as it is in Christianity), for it is anathetical to trust in God. Hopelessness, as we have just noted, is one of the attributes of non-believers, and as the Qur'ān states elsewhere: "And who despairs of the Mercy of his Lord except those who are astray"? (Qur'ān 15: 56; 41: 49).

Hopefulness, on the contrary, is one of the attributes of believers and one of the principles of true faith. The Qur'ān mentions the people who trust in God's infinite power: "They are those who, on being told: 'Your enemies have mustered a great force against you: fear them,' grew more tenacious in their faith and replied: 'God's help is sufficient for us. He is the best protector'" (Qur'ān 3: 173). God's power is more than enough to protect the faithful against difficulties. Furthermore, God mentions the ultimate end of the believers who have been persecuted in the way of God:

> Those who fled and were turned out of their homes and persecuted for following My way and who fought and were slain, I will most certainly bring them into gardens beneath which rivers flow; a reward from God, and with God is yet a better reward (Qur'ān 3: 195).

The Qur'ān mentions that natural disasters like droughts and earthquakes, which cause hopelessness, can also be remedied by hope provided by God: "And it is He Who sends down the rain after they have despaired". (Qur'ān 42: 28) Another verse says: "O My servants who have acted extravagantly against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of Allah" (Qur'ān 39: 53). For the faithful, therefore, there should be no reason to lose hope: "We gave you good news with truth, therefore be not despairing"

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(Qur'ān 39: 53). When the Prophet (peace be on him) was in a difficult state on account of his people's denial of and hostility to him and his message, God gave him hope by mentioning the story of prophets before him: "... and indeed many messengers were mocked at before you but I granted respite to those who disbelieved, and finally I punished them. Then how terrible was My punishment!" (Qur'ān 15: 55). For it is God's plan to make the faithful ultimately overcome the non-believers.

The story of the Prophet's entry into Makkah also illustrates the nature and importance the idea of hope in Islam. The Prophet (peace be on him) had a dream in which he saw that he had entered the Sacred Mosque in Makkah, his birthplace, the city from which he had been forced to emigrate to Madīnah. Most likely it was for this reason — God's promise conveyed to him through dreams and visions — that the Prophet (peace be on him) always remained full of hope. When he was in Madīnah he saw in his dream that he would enter Makkah in the state of peace. The Qur'ān mentions this event, confirming that God fulfilled the Prophet's dream:

> Truly did God fulfil the vision for His messenger: You shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if Allah wills, with minds secure, heads shaved, hair cut short, and without fear. For He knows what you know not, and He granted, besides this, a speedy victory (Qur'ān 12: 32).

This good news was given at to the Prophet (peace be on him) at a time when he and his Companions were considerably few, at the time before the Truce of Ḥudaybiyyah. For this reason the Prophet accepted the conditions that the Makkan idol worshippers imposed on him. He was hopeful that eventually the Makkan idol worshippers would embrace the truth. Despite all indications to the contrary the God strengthened the Prophet (peace be on him) and his followers with at the time hope and promised them that they would enter Makkah as victors (Qur'ān 48: 27). Though the Prophet's Companions were not very optimistic, the Prophet (peace be on him) himself was quite hopeful because of his total trust in God's promise.

The Qur'ān commands people to contemplate the ultimate end met by the nations that opposed God and followed evil ways. They should do so because the example of those nation shows that the ultimate victory belongs to God and to the faithful. The Qur'ān also brings to our attention the state of helplessness of the prophets which had resulted from the fact that their people rejected them, called them liars, and fiercely opposed them. All this lasted until the help of God arrived: "And when at length Our apostles despaired and thought they were denied, Our help came down to them, delivering whom We pleased" (Qur'ān 12: 110).

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In fact, sociologists agree about the importance of hope both for an individual and a society. Hope in individual or social life is like a sound set of reflexes in organisms. As the French social scientist Emile Durkheim (d. 1917) explains, a society without hope would be a monster incapable of living. According to Durkheim an actual society can no more do without this collective ideation than an organism can do without reflexes.[59] It would be no exaggeration to claim that the idea of hope is planted in human nature. As the religious and mystic poet Angelus Silesius (d.1677) says: "Hope is a rope" which rescues people.[60] The idea of the holy rope, which is the "rope of God", in the Qur'ānic terms, is an important theme in the Qur'ān. Holding fast to this rope would lead the believers to their triumph. God enjoins people to "hold fast to the rope of God (*ḥabl Allāh*) and be not divided" (Qur'ān 3: 103). It seems evident that the idea of paradise and a happy future also provides hope. This strong hope gives people ease of heart in their individual and social life. This idea is accepted as a sociological fact: "Periodically humanity marches toward an ideal world with infinite tentative efforts".[61] The idea of the expected Mahdī could then be considered a collective social hope within Islamic history.

Some psychologists believe that "hope is a dream of an awakened man".[62] They claim, however, that dreaming is absolutely essential for the health of the individual and a decrease in dreaming is the sign of serious illness.[63] Hopeful people suffer fewer illnesses such as stress and heart attacks. Since hope is the dream of the awakened, any society without a dream of better life and without any hope for a better future is seriously ill. In his commentary on Durkheim's work, Desroche offers a crucial point as regards finding hope (in the general sense of the word) through religion:

> Religion is not only a system of ideas, it is above all a system of forces. Religious life implies the existence of very specific forces. Recalling a well-known phrase, I will restrict myself to saying that they are the forces that can move mountains. By that, I mean that when man lives a religious life, he believes he is participating in a force that dominates him, but which at the same time supports him and raises him above himself.[64]

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[59] Emile Durkheim, *La Science Sociale et L'actron*, 197 cited in Henry Descroche, *Sociology of Hope*, tr., Carol Martin Sperry (London and Boston: Poutledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 42.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Henry Desroche, *The Sociology of Hope*, 42.
[62] Ibid., 9.
[63] Ibid., 15.
[64] Ibid., 16.

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This understanding of the power of hope helps us to comprehend the importance of the idea of the Mahdī in the early period of Islamic history. The Mahdī debates and discussions that happened after the civil war, in the early period of Islam, promoted ideas about the Mahdī. Muslims of the third century of Islam were looking for an alternative social environment more in tune with the ideals propounded by their faith. This search for a better society or government has sustained Muslims in the past, continues to sustain them at the present, and is likely to do so in the future as well. Islam never accepted the idea of fatalism as a social reality. People attempted, instead, to change their social environment, and when they could not achieve the desired change, they looked forward to a messianic figure, the Mahdī, to make the dream of an ideal social order come true. A society based on justice is one of the objectives of the Qur'ān, with or without a messianic figure. Therefore, quite naturally the Muslims' belief in the expected Mahdī was influenced, at least in part, by the Qur'ānic teachings. Future hope is aimed at "changing the present" and it does so by pointing to a "past model ideal". Therefore, when a "Mahdī" comes forward and proclaims that the preponderance of justice is around the corner, he is really saying that the future is now the present, and the ideal past will become the future. Therefore, one can conclude that the essential model and basis for the Mahdī is actually the Prophet (peace be on him) himself. All Caliphs imitated the Prophet (peace be on him). He represented a model for the rescuer. This messianic figure has been known as the Mahdī, and has also been identified with the Prophet (peace be on him), with regard to the similarity of names between the Mahdī and the Prophet's father. Perhaps for this reason many claimants of the Mahdī status generally proclaimed themselves to be Mahdīs after returning from Makkah.

It is impossible to claim that all traditions attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) in this regard are indeed from him. This is primarily because the transmitters who narrate the *aḥādīth* do so mostly in general terms[65]. The traditions in question, therefore, are not the exact words of the Prophet (peace be on him). From this we may understand that the narrators most likely described what they understood from a *ḥadīth*, rather than that they attempted a *verbatim* narration of the sayings of the Prophet (peace be on him). As a result, the narrator's personal inclinations could have become mixed with the Prophet's words. Therefore, the soundness of the traditions concerning the Mahdī is not on the level of the traditions pertaining to such matters as daily prayers or other rituals. As far as the Shī'ite creed is concerned, belief in Mahdī is central to it. Even though the Mahdī idea among

[65] Abū Bakr Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī al-Bayhaqī, *al-Asmā' wa al-Ṣifāt* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Azhar, 1987), 2: 13, 93.

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the Sunnīs is not as strong as among the Shī'ites, it is still a part of the Sunnī creed and is supported by Prophetic traditions. On the other hand, there is no clear conception of the Mahdī among the Sunnī Muslims. Sunni Muslims expect the advent of the Mahdī, but there is no specific frame for his picture.

Even though the Sunnīs and Shī'īs are not in complete agreement, I would argue that because of the Qur'ān confirms the ultimate triumph of good over evil, this provides the basis for the continuing expectation of the Mahdī. The universal idea of hope in Islam is inherent in the Qur'ān and is embodied in the figure of the Mahdī. The expectation of the Mahdī has provided solace and strength to believers in the past and will perhaps continue to do so in the future as well.

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